Seventeenth-Century French Painting

The pictures in this room date from about 1626 to 1653. Leading French painters of the period traveled to Rome, where they were influenced by contemporary Italian artists as well as High Renaissance masters and classical antiquity. In this age of the absolute monarchs Louis XIII and Louis XIV, French tastes stressed rationality, order, and idealization rather than realism or natural life. Such discipline led to the establishment, in 1648, of a royal art academy in Paris.

Sébastien Bourdon
French, 1616–1671

Bourdon, one of the twelve founding members of the French art academy, had spent the years 1634–1637 studying in Rome. In 1652–1654 he served as court painter to Queen Christina of Sweden. An extremely eclectic artist, Bourdon borrowed motifs and styles from a wide variety of sources and at least once sold one of his own landscapes as a work by Claude Lorrain.

The Finding of Moses probably about 1650

Canvas, 1.196 x 1.728 m
(47 x 68 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection
1961.9.65

Seeking to provide an accurate setting in biblical Egypt, Bourdon included palm trees in the fanciful landscape. Bourdon adapted a few elements from two different treatments of this subject by Poussin. The composition, though, is more severely geometric than any of Poussin's works. Pharaoh's daughter and her retinue of handmaidens, for instance, are grouped into the silhouette of a perfect square. Moreover, the translucent colors are unique to Bourdon and foretell the pastel hues of early eighteenth-century art.

Countess Ebba Sparre, probably 1653

Canvas, 1.061 x 0.902 m (41 3/4 x 35 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.34

While at Stockholm, Bourdon painted Ebba Sparre (1626–1662), a lady-in-waiting to and intimate companion of Sweden's Queen Christina. The animated portrayal of the countess and the bold lighting derive from portraits by the Flemish master Anthony van Dyck.

Philippe de Champagne (or Champaigne)
French, 1602–1674

Champagne, the only artist represented in this room who never visited Italy, was born and trained in Brussels. Arriving in Paris in 1621, he adapted the French decorative style but retained his Flemish realism and interest in minute details. A founder of the academy in France, by the 1640s Champagne converted to Jansenism, a particularly severe branch of Catholicism, and his subsequent works reveal an ascetic tendency toward grays and browns.

Omer Talon, dated 1649

Canvas, 2.250 x 1.616 m (88 1/2 x 63 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.35

Omer Talon (1595–1652), a liberal attorney general of the French Parliament, fought against the tyranny of Louis XIV's ministers. The somber tonality of judicial robes in blood red and ash black typifies Champagne's later work. The artist's Flemish heritage explains the candid face with its stern gaze and the attention to detailed textures, but French influence accounts for the formal composition, such as the open robe creating a diagonal line that rises toward the head.

Claude Lorrain
French, 1600–1682

The foremost landscape painter of the seventeenth century, Claude Gellée took the name Lorrain from his birthplace in the French-speaking duchy of Lorraine. After he arrived in Rome in 1613, the artist refined the exacting technique for blending translucent layers of oil paints in order to convey subtle atmospheric effects. Infused with the pastoral beauty of the Roman countryside, his harmonious landscapes—classically designed and yet romantic in feeling—had an enormous impact on later European attitudes toward nature as an ideal paradise.

Landscape with Merchants, about 1630

Canvas, 0.972 x 1.436 m (38 1/4 x 56 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.44

Claude's imaginary vistas usually capture an all-pervading effect of dawn or dusk light. Here, while a peaceful city basks in the morning sun, merchants oversee their cargo of musical instruments, luxurious furniture, potted plants, and barrels of fine wine. This union between industrious people and bountiful nature reflects Arcadian themes by the ancient poet Virgil.

The Judgment of Paris, 1645–1646

Canvas, 1.123 x 1.495 m (44 1/4 x 58 7/8 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1969.1.1

Paris, a shepherd prince of ancient Troy, was called on to judge the most beautiful of three goddesses. The rival contestants, however, attempted to bribe him. Juno, queen of the Olympian deities who is attended by her regal peacock, promises Paris a great empire. Minerva, goddess of warfare with helmet and spear, waits to offer him victory in battle. Venus, goddess of love accompanied by her son Cupid, won the contest by proposing

the most desirable woman as Paris' reward. With Venus' help he abducted a Greek beauty—soon to be known as Helen of Troy—and thereby started the Trojan War. In the distance is the citadel of Troy, behind which a setting sun may allude to the city's impending doom. Paris and Minerva, seated in opposite and symmetrical poses, enclose the standing goddesses, while the middle grove of trees divides the design in half. In a final adjustment, Claude moved one of the two sheep in the lower center; its original position, slightly farther up, can be detected. (Such alterations are called *pentimenti.*)

Nicolas Poussin
French, 1594–1665

Poussin, among the most important of all European painters, worked in France and traveled through Venice before reaching Rome in 1624. Shortly thereafter, he began seeking rigorously composed interpretations of philosophical themes. Except for a royal summons to return to Paris in 1640–1642, Poussin remained in Rome. By staying in Italy, France's two leading seventeenth-century artists, Poussin and Claude Lorrain, who sometimes sketched together in the country, did not join the royal art academy in Paris.

The Assumption of the Virgin, about 1626

Canvas, 1.344 x 0.981 m (52 7/8 x 38 5/8 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1963.5.1

The scene celebrates the Christian belief that after Mary's death her body was raised from her tomb into heaven. Executed about two years after Poussin's arrival in Rome, this canvas is among his first known paintings. In contrast to the severity of the artist's later classical works, a joyful exuberance emanates from the billowing clouds, swirling draperies, and flying cherubs. This dynamic movement, off-center composition, and rich color come directly from Poussin's knowledge of Venetian Renaissance painting and of Titian in particular.

The Feeding of the Child Jupiter, about 1640

Canvas, 1.174 x 1.553 m (46 1/8 x 61 1/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.2.21

According to Roman mythology, the infant Jupiter was concealed from his murderous father on the island of Crete. The princess Amalthea uses a goat's horn, or cornucopia, to give him milk to drink, while her sister Melissa holds a honeycomb for him to eat. Thus nurtured in secret, Jupiter grew to manhood and overthrew his father to become king of the Olympian deities. In the otherwise muted color scheme, the princess holding Jupiter wears pure yellow and blue, attracting attention to the main character. Poussin's coherent compositions and lucid color contrasts were in accord with a belief that painting, like mathematics, was governed by absolute logic. To obtain these calculated effects, Poussin often constructed a theatrical shadow box which, filled with movable wax manikins, served as a model for his final picture.

The Baptism of Christ, 1641–1642

Canvas, 0.955 x 1.210 m (37 5/8 x 47 5/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1946.7.14

This canvas, from a series of the Seven Sacraments, was commissioned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, an influential Roman patron. Although the six other pictures were painted in Rome, the *Baptism* was completed in Paris after Poussin had been called to the French court. Now dispersed, the set formed the first instance in Christian art in which the sacraments were depicted in separate paintings. The exact center of the austere design is occupied by a bearded man who points upward, indicating the divine voice, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The tallest tree in the landscape stands behind John the Baptist, accenting him, while Jesus bows his head beneath the hovering dove of the Holy Spirit.

Holy Family on the Steps, 1648

Canvas, 0.686 x 0.978 m (27 x 38 1/2 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.49

With its idealized figures and geometric composition, this painting is reminiscent of Renaissance works by Raphael. The heads of the Virgin and Christ Child occupy the apex of a visual pyramid. Mary's cousin Elizabeth and her son, John the Baptist, form one edge of the triangle, while Joseph anchors the other side. The classical architecture symbolically refers to Mary as the *scala celestis* or "stairway to heaven."

Simon Vouet
French, 1590–1649

Precocious and widely traveled, Vouet already had worked in London, Constantinople, and Venice before reaching Rome in 1614. Louis XIII summoned him back to Paris in 1627 to become chief court artist. Training many French painters, Vouet exercised his power by brashly setting up a rival institution to the royal academy of art.

The Muses Urania and Calliope, about 1634

Wood, 0.798 x 1.250 m (31 1/8 x 49 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.61

Resting beside a temple to Apollo, the god of creativity, two muses personify aspects of human knowledge. Urania, the muse of astronomy, wears a diadem of stars and leans against a celestial globe. The patroness of epic poetry and history, Calliope is crowned with gold and holds a volume of Homer's *Odyssey*. Winged infants or *putti* carry trophies of achievement—Apollo's laurel wreaths. The viewpoint from below suggests that this work was meant to be installed high up in a wall. The wooden panel probably graced a private library, honoring the goddesses of the arts and sciences.

Simon Vouet's earlier Roman manner differs greatly from the restrained taste he adopted in France. His *Saint Jerome and the Angel*, painted ten to twelve years before this picture of muses, usually hangs in the adjacent Gallery 30. His Roman phase, with its vigorous naturalism and dramatic spotlighting—influenced by Caravaggio—contrasts with his mature, courtly style that emphasized idealized forms and soft illumination.

Other seventeenth-century French works of art are on view in Main Floor Galleries 30, 44, 53, and the East Sculpture Hall.

The paintings discussed above normally hang in this room, but installations may change. PLEASE RETURN THIS SHEET TO GALLERY 32.

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